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Plain Tales from the Plains:
A Personal Account of Researching in Rural Bijnor over Three Decades

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I first visited rural Bijnor in north-western Uttar Pradesh in early 1982 to research the social organisation of childbearing, not expecting that it would be the first of several ‘punctuated revisits’ (Burawoy 2003). The subsequent projects explored women’s autonomy in relation to demographic change, fertility and population politics, health, education, and gender politics in general (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996a; Jeffery & Jeffery 1997; Jeffery et al. 2008). Communal politics joined this mix over the years (Jeffery & Jeffery 2006). The Bijnor research, then, has spanned from shortly after the Emergency (1975-7) through an era characterised by economic reforms, ‘India shining’ and increasingly communalised politics. And central to the research trajectory has been the ambition to locate ordinary people’s experiences and understandings on this broader canvass of secular changes that have impacted on them in diverse ways.

The first research in Bijnor involved ethnographic fieldwork in 1982-3 with Roger Jeffery and Andrew Lyon, and 1985 with Andrew Lyon (Jeffery et al. 1989a). Later research entailed lengthy stints of fieldwork in 1990-1 with Roger Jeffery, in 2000-2 with Roger Jeffery and Craig Jeffrey, and my solo fieldwork in 2002-5. Over the years, we have been indebted to our research assistants Swaleha Begum, Zarin Rais, Shaila Rais, the late Radha Rani Sharma, Chhaya Sharma and Manjula Sharma.¹

Hitherto, I have not reflected in print on either the pay-offs or the difficulties that revisits entail.² This paper, then, is a personal account that focuses on issues that revisiting the same research site have raised for me, rather than on the ‘results’ of the various fieldwork trips. It does not necessarily reflect the views of my colleagues involved in the research.

¹ The research in Bijnor was funded in 1982-3 and 1985 by ESRC (*The Social Organisation of Childbearing in Rural North India*, G00230027 and G00232238) and Hayter Fund (with Roger Jeffery and Andrew Lyon, a doctoral student); in 1990-1 by Overseas Development Administration (*Demographic Transition, Women’s Status and Agrarian Change in north India*) and Rockefeller Foundation (with Roger Jeffery); in 2000-2 by ESRC (*Household Strategies, Schooling Regimes and Social Exclusion in Western UP*, R000238495), Ford Foundation and Royal Geographical Society (with Roger Jeffery and Craig Jeffrey). I took full responsibility for the 2002-5 fieldwork funded by Wellcome Trust (*Demographic Change in north India: a longitudinal micro-study*, GR067231; Roger Jeffery was co-granther). My British Academy/Leverhulme Trust Senior Research Fellowship and Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship during 2009-2010 enabled further work on the Bijnor material. I am also grateful to the many members of the Vira family who facilitated the research; the villagers for their openness, forbearance and good humour; the research assistants for their energy and enthusiasm well beyond the call of duty; and Edward Simpson, Donald MacKenzie, and the participants and organisers of “Understanding Change in Rural India”, especially Jan Breman and Gerry Rodgers, for comments on drafts of this paper. None of them bears any responsibility for what I have written here.

² Descriptive accounts of the fieldwork are scattered through publications derived from this work, but they have not explicitly reflected on restudies: Jeffery et al. (1989a); Jeffery & Jeffery (1996a); Jeffery & Jeffery (1997).

Background to the Bijnor Research

In the mid-1970s, I conducted fieldwork among the *pirzāda* of the renowned Sufi shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi (Jeffery 1979). North Indian Muslims often (but certainly not always) arrange marriages between people who are already closely related (including first or second cousins, but also people whose prior links are more complex). Literature on north Indian caste Hindus, however, indicates various prohibitions on marriage between closely-related people. North Indian Muslims, then, often marry relatives who are unacceptable marriage partners for their caste Hindu neighbours. I began speculating about the implications for women of being married into a household of familiar kin (as some Muslim brides are), rather than being married into a household of strangers (typically the case among caste Hindus). What impact, if any, did these contrasting marriage practices have on gender politics at the domestic level? Did close-kin marriage empower young married women and enhance their decision-making capacity?

By the late 1970s, second-wave feminism in the global North was spawning feminist theory and academic interest in gender politics. In 1979, I gave birth under highly-medicalised conditions in Edinburgh. Not surprisingly, the medicalisation of childbirth was one theme in feminist debates that drew my attention, especially the widespread (but problematic) presumption that women in the global South experience more ‘natural’ and less-medicalised birthing (for a critique, see Macintyre 1977). High levels of maternal, neo-natal and infant mortality were absent from these romanticised portrayals. Around the same time, World Health Organisation was advocating worldwide training-programmes for traditional birth attendants (TBAs, known as *dāī* in much of India), that aimed not only to improve birthing conditions and reduce maternal mortality but also to use TBAs as conduits for family-planning information and technologies even in remote rural areas.³ During my research in Nizamuddin, Roger Jeffery was researching health policy-making in India and developed an interest in how policy played out at the local level; for instance, he had discovered that *dāī* training-programmes were not the novelty they were cracked up to be—indeed, they had been repeatedly tried and abandoned when they failed in various parts of British India in the nineteenth century (Jeffery 1988).

Inspired by these and related issues, we homed in on rural Bijnor. The district ranked relatively highly on most economic indicators, but its social indicators—such as literacy—were more modest (Singh 2001: Table VIII.3). Fertility levels—as elsewhere in the rural Gangetic plain—remained relatively high. Its other demographic characteristics matched our interests: about three-quarters of Bijnor district’s population was rural and the Muslim population was unusually sizeable: about a third of the rural population and over two-thirds of the urban population (Jeffery & Jeffery 2006; Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India 2004). Yet, crucially, it had no history of communal conflicts: accompanied as we would be by a toddler, we did not wish our research to be de-railed. And previous fieldwork in Lahore and Delhi had entailed learning Urdu and Hindi, so we could quickly begin communicating with villagers in Bijnor (for more details, see Jeffery et al. 1989a: Appendix 1).

Obtaining Entry, Gaining Acceptance

Selecting a research location based on its socio-economic and demographic profile is one thing. Actually choosing a specific site and making an entry is quite another. We arrived in Delhi in early 1982 without personal contacts in Bijnor. In the event, at a reception after a seminar, one attendee informed me that her paternal grandmother originated from Bijnor

³ Jeffery & Jeffery (1993) and Jeffery et al. (2002) contain critiques of this approach, based on the Bijnor research.

district and that one of her grandmother's brothers, Kunwar Satya Vira, still lived there. The Vira family were prominent local landowners, engaged in local politics and founders of schools and colleges in the area, mainly in Bijnor town. Kunwar Satya Vira managed the family farm in Dharmnagri (about 5 km from Bijnor town). A few weeks later, we visited him and decided to select Dharmnagri and Jhakri, two adjacent villages, for our research. Jhakri had an exclusively Muslim population of nearly 400, whilst Dharmnagri's population of nearly 700 was about sixty per cent caste Hindus (mainly Sahni and Dhimar) and the remainder Dalits (Chamar and Jatab).⁴ Within days, we had appointed research assistants (Hindu and Muslim women from Bijnor town) to act as note-takers. Thus far, it had seemed remarkably simple to establish a research base.

Yet the first few months of fieldwork were anything but straightforward. Since there was little information on childbearing in rural India, the research entailed first building a picture through informal conversations and observations before gradually engaging in more systematic data collection. The pace, however, was more often dictated by villagers' initial responses to us, the only foreigners residing in the area in living-memory.

Kunwar Satya Vira was a major employer of agricultural labour from both villages, so it was imperative to establish some distance from him, despite his crucial role in enabling access to the villages. No other village homes could have accommodated our four-person household, however. Kunwar Satya Vira put in a good word to the District Medical Officer, and we were offered the disused operating-theatre at the Dharmnagri government dispensary—not, of course, a very homely abode. It lacked plumbing and electricity, but was *pakka* and far more robust than village houses, which were mostly still thatched adobe single rooms. We gratefully accepted this offer—but had failed to predict the villagers' responses.

Villagers had fresh memories of the coercive family-planning drive that was integral to the Emergency. People told of village men hiding in the sugar-cane fields to avoid being rounded up for sterilisation. The operating-theatre had been padlocked since last being used for sterilisations during this period. Villagers feared that we were the vanguard of another sterilisation programme, a fear exacerbated by the yellow Mahindra jeep—identical to those used by family-planning workers during the Emergency—that we had for transporting the research assistants from Bijnor town. Many queried our motives. Walking around the villages, stopping to chat, made many villagers apprehensive and suspicious. Our early attempts to create village censuses, or to discuss childbearing and women's maternity histories, met with querulous questions. Some women in Jhakri were frightened enough to run away and hide inside their homes in case we tried to compel them to adopt family-planning. For a couple of months in early 1982, these suspicions virtually precluded conversations with the villagers about anything more sensitive than British farming-practices and grain-prices (about which we were singularly unknowledgeable). It was extremely uncomfortable (it is unpleasant being considered dangerous) and frustrating (we had to soft-pedal on data collection). Then several events shifted villagers' perceptions quite dramatically and helped to reduce the mistrust that was such an obstacle.

Construction of the nearby Madhya Ganga barrage was under way. Compounding villagers' anxieties about family-planning were rumours that the government planned to relocate

⁴ Some Bijnor villages have exclusively Hindu or Muslim populations, others are mixed. Over the years, the Bijnor research involved two further villages: Qaziwala (a predominantly Muslim village) and Nangal Jat (a Jat, Chamar and Muslim village) that were the primary focus of the 1990-1 and 2000-2 projects (Jeffery & Jeffery 1997; Jeffrey et al. 2008). Since we never lived in these villages, the level of engagement was much lower than in Dharmnagri and Jhakri, on which this paper focuses.

villagers cultivating land by the barrage, and that we were providing the government with information about how many would be affected. Roger Jeffery accompanied a delegation of village men to ask the District Magistrate in Bijnor town about these rumours but received a severe dressing-down for meddling in government affairs that were none of his business. The men with him were astonished to see a *sahib* treated so curtly. The event became a talking-point and the belief that we were government agents intent on causing harm gradually began to recede.

Even more crucially, in April 1982, I was called to observe a delivery in Dharmnagri (Jeffery et al. 1989a: 114-118).⁵ Rajballa had visited the dispensary a few days earlier to consult the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife, who dealt with her summarily and sent her home. When I arrived at Rajballa's house, the dispensary compounder had already injected oxytocin to augment her contractions. After several hours, no progress had been made and he was summoned again. He was about to administer another injection when I restrained him, fearing that the baby was transverse breech and that an injection would be dangerous.⁶ He examined Rajballa (for the first time) and agreed with my diagnosis. Thereupon ensued a lengthy discussion among the compounder, myself and Rajballa's terrified in-laws about taking her to hospital. Eventually, they consented to go to the government hospital in Bijnor town. The reception there made me understand why Rajballa's in-laws were so hesitant. I myself was verbally abused for being a pushy Punjabi wanting treatment in the middle of the night. The doctor who performed the caesarean section was courteous if rather patronising, but Rajballa experienced cruel and abusive treatment from nurses and other staff, both on admission and during her time in hospital. Her husband Rohtash was reduced to cringing servility and he and his female relatives had to remain at Rajballa's bed-side to ensure that she received medications on time and that the space around her bed was properly cleaned (which staff refused to do without payment). For the villagers, this event served to dispel rumours that I wanted to prevent women from having children and would compel them to adopt family-planning. It was a watershed in how women in both villages regarded me. For me, this was a hugely chastening episode. Being verbally abused and watching the humiliations meted out to Rajballa and her family members gave me a painful and immediate insight into villagers' encounters with the state.

Later in 1982, Roger Jeffery and I adopted a baby girl, born in a Delhi clinic, and brought her to Dharmnagri.⁷ This also served to convince villagers that we were not hostile to children. Moreover, it created talking-points about son preferences and childcare: the fieldnotes from the succeeding weeks brim over with people's unsolicited comments and questions. Distributing sweets to villagers generated the rumour that the baby was a boy—and incomprehension that we would celebrate a girl's arrival. Having one daughter already and then opting to have another caused bewilderment. Would the new daughter be educated and her marriage arranged? Would she be provided with a dowry? And how could I be so irresponsible as to feed her mashed banana during the winter as her first solid food? Surely I realised that its *tāsir* [influence] was 'cold' and that she would probably die of a chill?

These episodes enabled the fieldwork pace to pick up. They also became launch-pads for many spontaneous conversations about family-building, optimal numbers of sons and daughters, the crucial contributions of sons and their in-married wives to household

⁵ Personal names in publications derived from the Bijnor fieldwork are pseudonyms.

⁶ For more on the dangers of injecting oxytocin, see Jeffery et al. (2007) and Brhlikova et al. (2009). I return to this and other interventions below.

⁷ To protect her privacy, the only brief reference to this is in Jeffery et al. (1989a). The conversations that her arrival generated, however, proved crucial for the research.

reproduction, parental anxieties about having daughters who needed to be married and provided with dowries, as well as about household organisation and the gender politics of domestic life more generally.

Moreover, villagers' views of the local state in its various guises became a constant through the Bijnor fieldwork. We could begin to comprehend and explore their fearfulness about engaging with the 'state', whether the DM or government hospital staff. Even after agreeing to answer questions, villagers often anxiously enquired if the information would go *ūpar* ('above', to the authorities). Would details of landholdings be reported? Would the number of children become part of official documents? Would there be repercussions if villagers divulged information about their lives?

People talked about needing to give bribes to get their 'work' done and of how money would go from 'the bottom to the very top', with the Prime Minister taking his cut. Given the focus on health, childbearing and family-building, of course, these comments often revolved around health-care staff. There was (and still is) cynicism about government doctors whose offensive or desultory behaviour during official working-hours (if they even bothered to report for work) evaporated the instant they began their (technically illegal) private work (Jeffery & Jeffery 2008). People feared going to hospital and often delayed doing so, sometimes with disastrous results (Jeffery & Jeffery 2010), and they complained about the coercive activities of government health-staff in relation to family-planning or polio (Jeffery 2014; Jeffery et al. 2008). Bijnor villagers did not regard the state as *mā-bāp*.

Beyond that, people began to trust our guarantees of confidentiality. Villagers knew that we were friendly with Kunwar Satya Vira and his wider family and that we sometimes went to their home for meals. Nevertheless, Kunwar Satya Vira's employees soon began talking about their experiences, especially how his accountant cheated workers by paying not in cash but in rice, whilst always claiming he was providing high-value grain. As the villagers often demonstrated to me, the grains were broken and mixed with grit and pebbles. But villagers praised Kunwar Satya Vira for being such a 'big' man that he could veto a police *thana* in the village, for they feared police brutality and extortions. They also reported several occasions when he intervened in disputes about marital violence or dowry to protect the woman involved. Within families, too, women began to realise that their confidences would not go *āge* [further].

One day in 1982, when the *maulvī* used the Jhakri mosque tannoy-system to summon a man from the fields to be interviewed by Andrew Lyon, we realised that a sea-change had taken place, despite some lingering edginess. Gradually, the fieldwork (mostly) began to proceed more smoothly and subsequent visits have never necessitated the delicate negotiations that slowed the first fieldwork. By 1985, there was a palpable change in villagers' responses during the fieldwork I conducted with Andrew Lyon: between 1983 and 1985, nothing untoward could be attributed to the fieldwork and villagers' confidences were clearly not going *ūpar*. Most villagers trusted that we were merely trying to understand their lives in their own terms, and began accepting our presence and tolerating our questions—often with good humour and banter on their part.

By the time of my solo fieldwork in the early 2000s, Kunwar Satya Vira insisted that I live in his home rather than establish my own household. This provided a new vista on the village: seeing first-hand how Vira family members could use their local influence in resolving disputes among villagers, or help villagers in their dealings with the sugar-cane cooperative and their children's school admissions. Admittedly, village women were diffident about coming to his house, so I was less accessible than when I lived on the dispensary compound. On the other hand, the evidence over time, that nothing people said would spread around the village or be despatched *ūpar* to the authorities, now meant that my questions no longer

generated anxieties, even among young people who could hardly have recalled my previous visits. More children were attending school—and clipboards, sheets of paper and pencils that caused apprehension in 1982 were now commonplace. Some children even peered over our shoulders as my research assistant and I updated household census forms, pointing out their own names or correcting spellings. Young adults were also relaxed about answering questions. For instance, informal money-lending within the villages was a sensitive topic that I had hesitated to address head-on. During the early 2000s fieldwork, I learned that Fatima and her husband Farooq engaged in informal money-lending within Jhakri: one day, their older son, who had been a small boy in 1982, patiently explained the intricacies of this process, the interest rates they charged and so on. Similarly, teaching-staff at local *madrasās*—institutions often at the sharp end of Hindu nationalist allegations about Muslim terrorism—openly discussed their fears and frustrations, which reflected the major shift in communal politics since 1982.

‘Trained’ Informants

In the mid-1970s, my language skills were honed among the Delhi *pirzāda*. I was familiar with the flowery manners of *adab* [etiquette], gracious turns of phrase like *tashrīf rakhiye* [please place your dignity] and the vocabulary of Sufi spiritualism. Rustic speech and manners were rather different. I had to adjust to the blunter *baitho* or *baith* [sit down] and to being addressed as *tum* or even *tu* [the least respectful form of ‘you’] rather than *āp*, although I could never bring myself to reciprocate in kind. I learned a goodly number of obscenities—often related to women’s anatomy and sex—that my research assistants at first were too embarrassed to explain. I needed a vocabulary of ethno-biology for talking about women’s anatomy, conception, pregnancy, birth and the post-partum period. And women married into the area from other villages spoke subtly different dialects.

Having seen the arrogant manner of local urbanites (including medical-staff), I exhorted the research assistants to avoid being regarded as threats. We would listen in a non-judgemental and engaged manner, give women space to express their opinions in as much detail as they wished and not be like ‘social workers’ issuing advice and criticism. We answered women’s questions—whether about life in UK and what being in an aeroplane was like, or about childrearing, health-care and family-planning. To avoid flaunting our status, we wore simple clothing and the minimum jewellery required for properly-attired women. Most conversations took place in or around women’s homes. Whenever possible we refused to sit on the chairs women often fetched specially from their homes or borrowed from neighbours. Rather, we sat on one of the *chārpāīs* usually sitting outside people’s homes, often engaging in banter about who should sit at the ‘head’ (the position that marked superiority). Sometimes, women visited me in the operating-theatre after consulting dispensary medical-staff. Or we met women on the village outskirts in the areas where they prepared dung-cakes [*ūple*] for cooking-fuel. A research assistant and I would each perch on a couple of dried *ūple*, notebooks to the ready, and talk to women whilst they prepared *ūple* with fresh dung.⁸ Each woman worked in her own patch somewhat separated from others, and conversations here often became whispered and sensitive, with accusations of marital violence, petty thieving of foodstuffs, young married women being cheated of wedding jewellery or being bullied by mothers-in-law or *jethānī* [husband’s elder brother’s wife] and so on.

Ceasing to be threatening, however, did not necessarily entail ceasing to be puzzling. Young women were unused to voicing their feelings and opinions and to being taken seriously. They were often amazed that the research assistants and I had nothing better to do than talk with them at length about their upbringing, marriages, dowries, experiences of pregnancy and

⁸ See Jeffery et al. (1989b; 2012) on the *economic* importance of women’s dung-work.

childbirth, their daily work in their affinal village and how it was negotiated with other women, how (if at all) they obtained respite from work during pregnancy or the post-partum period, or how they managed to obtain leave to visit their natal village. With encouragement, though, women readily began recounting their own experiences, highlighting the vagaries of illness and death etc. in comparing themselves with other women.

These were relatively straightforward and grounded issues, but other questions continued to perplex. Researching childbearing entailed engaging with local ideas of anatomy and physiology, beliefs about conception, appropriate diet during pregnancy and immediately after giving birth, about how labour should be managed, where babies should be born and who should be in attendance, notions of birth pollution and vulnerability. In Dharmnagri and Jhakri alike, such matters were ‘natural’, basic and taken-for-granted knowledge that any adult would have. Village women were astonished to be asked about them by the research assistants. And they were bewildered that an educated foreigner was so ignorant that she continually needed to ask about matters connected with pollution and shame. Surely I was not intending to become a *dāī*—a far from lucrative means of earning a living and one regarded as thoroughly undesirable by village women?⁹ With some persuading, women gradually accepted that my questions made some sense because birthing in UK was so different. For instance, they patiently answered queries about who helped newly-delivered women with their domestic duties after childbirth. Initially women provided formulaic answers that the *nand* [husband’s sister] helps and that a married *nand* is summoned from her affinal village if necessary. When my observations indicated that this did not always happen, women produced lengthy explanations for why the *nand* had or had not been called after particular deliveries (Jeffery et al. 1989a: Chapter 7). It even became possible to joke about these matters, as when I mentioned that cats and dogs are sterilised in UK; or when I enquired (somewhat facetiously), whether the *nand* ever helped her brother’s wife after *nasbandī* [sterilisation operation]: no, of course not, for birth is a matter of *khushī* [happiness, celebration], but sterilisation is not.

Gradually, women began engaging more pro-actively with the research. Sometimes, women came to the operating-theatre to inform me about something they knew I would find interesting—an imminent delivery, the birth of a girl to a couple who already had several daughters, a dispute about a dowry, a young married woman who sought help from her brothers when she faced marital problems. And in 1990, Fatima, married in Jhakri, insisted on accompanying me to Qaziwala after I mentioned that one of her relatives there was afraid to answer my questions. Fatima steamrolled through the conversation, haranguing her relative, explaining that I would ask simple and totally harmless questions, instructing her to respond politely, and reassuring her that no harm would result. This, of course, was not a means of obtaining ‘informed consent’ that would be recognised by any ethics committee in a British university. If nothing else, though, it indicates an extraordinary level of trust that Fatima was prepared to intervene so forthrightly on my behalf.

Over time, then, women in Dharmnagri and Jhakri ceased to consider me a threat, someone who would report what they said to government authorities or to other family members. My questions were often puzzling, sometimes sufficient to cause mirth, but not dangerous. And, whilst some women tended to be rather perfunctory in their answers, many others became pro-active facilitators of my work, lively and engaging raconteurs of their own life stories or of events they know I find relevant and intriguing.

⁹ For villagers’ views of the *dāī*, see Jeffery et al. (2002) and Jeffery & Jeffery (1993).

Long-term Data and Social Change

The research visits have all combined quantitative and qualitative data collection. The 1982-3 research produced censuses of Dharmnagri and Jhakri and maternity histories of all the ever-married women (recording children's births, immunisations and deaths, and use of family-planning techniques to space children or terminate childbearing). At that time, few village women knew their children's birth-dates, and trying to arrive at accuracy involved creating an orderliness that was not very meaningful to them. The endeavour often required lengthy discussions of the season if not month of birth, gaps between children, whether specific babies were born before or after children in neighbouring homes and so on. Trying to fix dates of miscarriages and stillbirths, or the birth-dates of children who later died was even more complex (as well as often being painful for the women concerned), especially when these events had occurred some years earlier. Yet, despite initial puzzlement over my interests, women generally responded good naturedly to my questions. In the early 2000s, for instance, Gulshan told me proudly about a male government employee who had been interviewing women about their children—and how she had systematically recounted all her deliveries and included even children who had died, just as she had earlier done for me.

Using the 1982 village censuses, we selected twenty-two key informants in Dharmnagri and nineteen in Jhakri, who became the focus of several rounds of semi-structured interviews: young married couples from differing class, caste and community backgrounds, in the midst of family-building and more likely than others to recollect women's childbearing experiences (Jeffery et al. 1989a: Appendix 1). The qualitative interviews that I conducted with the women ranged over topics such as household organisation through time, negotiations and conflicts about property, marriage arrangement and dowry, women's contacts with their natal kin, women's work in their affinal village and relationships with affinal kin, accounts of illnesses and medical treatment, as well as pregnancy, birthing and the post-partum period. The fieldnotes also include reports of serendipitous conversations, events observed and so forth.

Each subsequent fieldtrip entailed updating the village censuses and the maternity histories (including for women married into the villages since the previous fieldtrip), with associated fieldnotes recording women's supplementary comments. Updating maternity histories was generally relatively straightforward, since the small children recorded on the previous occasion provided fixed points for any siblings born between fieldtrips, and some parents also began recording birth-dates with a view to enrolling children in school. There have also been further rounds of semi-structured interviews, with the original key informants and others, as well as more informal conversations.

There are now several thousand pages of single-spaced typed fieldnotes spanning the years from 1982. It is possible to trace all the households through time, in most detail for the key informants for whom the rich combination of the quantitative and qualitative data furnishes quite rounded accounts of how they have fared since the early 1980s, replete with numerous detailed renditions of their often spicy speech. Alongside these long-term data about the villagers, there is information about the infrastructure and institutions in the villages and their environs.

A major part of the data analysis has been exploring the interplay of villagers' everyday lives with the diverse and significant changes in the social and economic environment in which they must navigate. Between the early 1980s and the early 2000s, alongside numerous continuities, there have been striking alterations in the roles of the state and the market in providing health-care and schooling, in how economic and demographic factors impact on livelihood options, the costs of childrearing and schooling and care in old-age, in party political issues and the climate of communal politics. And these wider processes impinge on

men and women, Dalits, Muslims and caste Hindus, old and young, richer and poorer in distinctive ways.

By the early 2000s, cycle-rickshaws plied between Dharmnagri and Bijnor town, more village men owned cycles or ‘scooties’ themselves, and a row of small shops had sprung up in Dharmnagri. The road across the Madhya Ganga barrage, completed in the mid-1980s, had made Meerut and Muzaffarnagar to the west accessible for medical treatment, jobs and education. The supply of electricity for lighting and tube-wells was rather more predictable than in 1982 (although by no means 24/7). The latrines in Jhakri that had required the removal of night-soil had largely been replaced by ‘flush’ toilets (squat toilets with septic tanks but without cisterns), and more homes in Dharmnagri now also had ‘flush’ toilets. Mobile phones had entered the villagers’ repertoire of communication technologies.

Whilst the state primary- and middle-schools had atrophied, non-state educational facilities had expanded, and many more village children were in schooling. A handful of small private primary schools had opened in the vicinity. In addition to extending their educational institutions in Bijnor town, the Vira family had built a large secondary-school between Dharmnagri and Jhakri that catered for several hundred children from the locality, mainly Hindu and Dalit; some girls from Dharmnagri attended this school, though hardly any Muslim girls did. But a *madrasā* in a nearby village had expanded massively since the 1980s and had a roll of over 1000, more than half of them girls.

As before, villagers did not regard the state’s role in health-care provision as wholly benign. In any case, it remained lamentably inadequate: the dispensary even more run-down, staff attendance erratic and largely limited to matters such as family-planning, TB and the pulse polio programme (Jeffery 2014). For curative health-care, however, villagers could now access a much greater range of non-state facilities, from untrained and unlicensed practitioners working in small roadside kiosks to private clinics in Bijnor town that provided in-patient services. Villagers’ expectations about the outcomes of illness episodes had risen strikingly since 1982—when ‘fatalism’ was often realistic. Now, villagers were more optimistic that a solution was at hand—but they also faced substantially increased outlays when family members were ill (Jeffery & Jeffery 2008; 2010).

Demographic changes within the villages echoed those in north India more generally. The maternity histories indicate how dramatically child-survival improved from the mid-1960s onwards. The Emergency had little direct *demographic* impact and only after a time-lag of nearly 20 years did fertility-limitation become more widespread. Discussions with village women reflected some shifts since the early 1980s in views on family-planning: younger couples in Dharmnagri now tended to presume that the wife would be sterilised once she had two or three children. Yet, largely because of *political* impact of the Emergency, most Muslims in Jhakri remained nervous about the implications of sterilisation for their fate in the after-life (Jeffery et al. 1989a: 177-213; Jeffery et al. 2008). Women still hoped to give birth at home, with oxytocin injections more commonplace than in the early 1980s. There were more institutional deliveries—but villagers opted for them only in emergencies, and they still feared the expense as well as poor-quality and demeaning treatment (Jeffery & Jeffery 2008; 2010).

As before, the main crops were sugar-cane, wheat and rice, with some eucalyptus and poplar, but most ploughing was done by tractor rather than teams of oxen, though harvesting was still by hand. Some landless households were allocated land near the Ganga that became cultivable after the flood-controls associated with the barrage. This encroachment on erstwhile *jangal* had reduced access to fodder (and thereby to dung for fertiliser and cooking-fuel) and to free building-materials (mud, reeds for thatch). Landowners relied more on commercial inorganic fertilisers and most villagers were locked into the cash economy for

pakka bricks, cement, wrought-iron grills and so forth. More generally, though, the lag between improvements in child-survival and the onset of fertility decline had posed challenges to household livelihood strategies. Typically, plots of land inherited by cohorts of brothers born in the 1960s and 1970s were much reduced. Landowners could more readily farm without employing labourers. Men from poorer landowning households needed off-farm employment: as some put it, they were now *nā mazdūr*, *nā kissān* [neither labourer nor farmer]. Given the paucity of employment opportunities, and the need for bribes [*rishwat*] or influence [*sifārish*] to secure a job, many of the more marginalised villagers, especially Dalits and Muslims, were doubting the value of spending money on their sons' schooling. Compared with the early 1980s, more landless and land-poor men were commuting daily into Bijnor town or migrating on a seasonal basis as far away as Chandigarh, Surat or Kashmir.

Marriages were still arranged by family elders with little or no input from the potential spouses, and women's 'marriage migration' to their affinal homes continued to be an important form of labour migration. Domestic technologies had changed very little since the early 1980s and women's work remained time-consuming and arduous, as well as vital to household wellbeing. Hand-pumps continued to provide domestic water-supplies and cooking was still primarily done using *ūple* and other bio-fuels, though a few households had invested in gas canisters. Yet the declining use of oxen for ploughing had affected women's work providing fodder and processing dung for manure and cooking-fuel, whilst grain was no longer threshed or milled manually. Women's work, however, was still oriented around household reproduction rather than remunerative employment. Although girls' school or *madrasā* enrolment had increased dramatically since the early 1980s, few girls continued in formal education past puberty and their schooling fed into the marriage market not employment.¹⁰ The role of schooling either in empowering women or affecting childrearing practices (e.g. in relation to hygiene) and other domestic practices remained elusive.

Although sex-selective abortions appeared to be uncommon, son preferences continued to be taken-for-granted and were reflected in the juvenile sex-ratios in the two villages. Arranging marriages continued to generate huge anxieties for parents, whether for fear of deception about the qualities of their children's prospective spouses or the financial outlays that would be required. Dowry was still an issue, but villagers' expectations had changed in manifold ways. In the early 1980s, Dharmnagri residents often alluded to a shift away from previous practices when dowry-giving was (they claimed) based on what people could provide *khushī-se* [out of happiness, voluntarily] to a situation where demands were feared and not uncommonly made. At that time, Jhakri residents did not report such a shift among Muslims, but by the early 2000s dowry-demands and expectations about what the dowry should contain had changed substantially for them too. In both villages, a colour TV, 'sofa-set' and various white-goods were now virtually essential. Moreover, young men's marriages were often delayed until their households could afford to construct separate *pakka* rooms for each son and his bride: today's brides, people said, will not tolerate the simple shelters that were standard when their parents-in-law were married. And it is possible to take a more considered longer-term perspective on the conflicts that arise among women within households. In the 1980s, conversations with key informant women often revolved around the controls exercised by mothers-in-law, about household work, when daughters-in-law could visit their parents, or custody of their jewellery, for instance. Conversations with these same women now that they were mothers-in-law themselves displayed a depressing repetitiveness as women moved into

¹⁰ For general discussions of girls' education in rural Bijnor see Jeffery & Jeffery (1994a; 1996b). For more on girls' education in the local *madrasās*, see Jeffery et al. (2004; 2005; 2006; 2012).

the older generation.¹¹ Mobile phones, however, may be putting young brides into a rather less vulnerable position than previously (Jeffrey & Doron 2013: 165-83).

The long-term data from Dharmnagri and Jhakri, then, can provide a window on the social and economic continuities and changes that villagers have experienced since the early 1980s: improvements in some areas of daily-life alongside the resilience of many earlier concerns and difficulties, the continuing son preferences and anxieties over dowry, and how, despite demographic shifts, adult women's daily-lives continue to revolve around the domestic sphere.

Would that things were as simple as this account might make it seem, however. Repeated revisits to the same research site has undoubtedly furnished numerous rewards, yet there are also complications and pitfalls along the way: among them, ethical issues connected with data management, confidentiality and memory, dilemmas in data-analysis and interpretation, and the researcher's inevitable impact.

Confidentiality, Memory and Long-term Data

Nowadays, UK research funders and universities are much more attuned to the ethical issues raised by social research than they were in the early 1980s. Core ethical concerns include the psychological and/or physical harm that vulnerable research participants might experience, informed consent, confidentiality, preservation of informants' anonymity, ensuring the security of data and vigilance with respect to those who can access the data, and the researcher's safety.¹²

Ethnographic studies—and all the more so ethnographic restudies—pose complex problems for maintaining appropriate ethical standards. Ethnographic data include reports on interviews, observations, conversations and discussions with several participants, and accounts of episodes involving other people in the research site. Anonymised fieldnotes would hamper the tracking of cross-references and allusions to other people.¹³ For the Bijnor research (and I suspect for most ethnographic research), the fieldnotes were stored with people's real names and anonymisation only takes place shortly before finalising a piece of writing, if specific people are mentioned or quoted.¹⁴ From the initial Bijnor research onwards, we certainly tried to explain our purpose—although this was often hard, since villagers had little experience of formal education or understanding of social science

¹¹ This, of course, brings to mind the TV soap serial "*Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*".

¹² For examples of recent ethical codes, see those from British Sociological Association, Association of the Social Anthropologists, ESRC and University of Edinburgh/Social and Political Science:

<http://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf> (accessed 20th August 2015)

<http://www.theasa.org/downloads/ASA%20ethics%20guidelines%202011.pdf> (accessed 20th August 2015)

http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/framework-for-research-ethics_tcm8-33470.pdf (accessed 20th August 2015)

<http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/research/ethics> (accessed 20th August 2015)

¹³ By contrast, once-off interviews from surveys can be readily understood when anonymised, since they are not concerned with relationships and processes among the people interviewed.

¹⁴ After discussions with people in Dharmnagri and Jhakri, we retained the villages' real names (although I would probably not have done so nowadays).

research. So did they comprehend that all conversations and activities are potentially research data? And how should informed consent be obtained from people not from the research site, for instance, medical practitioners encountered when accompanying villagers to urban facilities, or guests at weddings?

Access to long-term data is a crucial advantage of restudies: for new research to benefit fully from the insights of previous studies in the same site, the researchers must be familiar with the data from earlier visits. This, of course, poses issues for secure data storage. But for revisits by the same researcher(s), the lack of anonymisation in fieldnotes facilitates the process of updating information and building up a picture, for instance, of the trajectories of particular people and households over time. Researchers revisiting a research site are not just familiar faces, and it is not simply a matter of having built up trust. Over and above this, informants themselves recollect previous conversations and (at some level at least) know what the researcher knows. The returning researcher can prepare for new fieldwork by re-reading the earlier fieldnotes—and rapidly become immersed in the intangible benefits of familiarity, as a person who already knows about past *dukh-sukh* [sadness-joy] of individuals and their households. Indeed, re-engaging with informants often entails catching up with family news (in both directions), in which allusions are made to previous events and earlier conversations.

Restudies involving *different* researchers over time would, however, raise further issues for confidentiality and anonymity.¹⁵ How familiar with the original data can new researchers actually be? How familiar *should* they be? What should new researchers reveal about what they already know? How can they sustain in-depth and enlightening conversations with informants who may or may not understand what they know? The researcher new to the site who is endeavouring to conduct a restudy certainly cannot straightforwardly engage with informants without breaching previous confidentiality.

Moving Targets and Social Change

Even if such ethical concerns are addressed appropriately, restudies raise several further issues. A general account of social and economic change can perhaps be outlined (as above). But long-term data are often a source of frustration rather than completely unalloyed benefits, for some rather important dis-continuities and complexities can hobble attempts to account for social change.¹⁶

Whilst Dharmnagri and Jhakri both still exist as identifiable nucleated villages, they and the world around them have altered in diverse ways since the early 1980s. In practice, though, it is difficult to discern which changes in villagers' lives reflect these wider trends and which are primarily attributable to the inexorable movement of individuals through the 'domestic cycle'. If the key informants and I inhabit (more or less) the same bodies, our lives have also moved on. In 1982, the key informants were selected to reflect the social and economic diversity of the two villages: they had in common being young couples in the midst of childbearing. By the early 2000s, few parents and parents-in-law of the key informants were still alive and some key informants had died or moved away. Men who had been farming jointly with fathers and brothers were running separate enterprises. Women who had been living jointly with mothers-in-law were now cooking at separate *chūlhās* [cooking-hearths] or

¹⁵ This is crucial for the ESRC-funded project *Rural Change and Anthropological Knowledge in post-colonial India*, Edward Simpson (PI), Patricia Jeffery (Co-I), with postdoctoral researchers Tina Otten, Tommaso Sbriccoli and Alice Tilche, as the original researchers' fieldnotes are available for two of the three sites.

¹⁶ Burawoy (2003) provides a general discussion of issues that restudies raise.

alongside daughters-in-law. Some daughters were already married and made only occasional visits, with their children in tow. Some sons, too, had wives and small children of their own. In the interim, my own standing had also altered. In 1982, women of around my own age had attached the appellation *behn-jī* [sister] to me. By the 2000s, the sobriquets *auntie-jī* and *nānī-mā* [maternal grandmother] were added to the repertoire by recently in-married women and small children, and young married women in Dharmnagri were exhorted to cover their heads with their *sārī ānchal* and press my ankles and lower legs (much to my embarrassment).

On the face of it, it should be possible to track the key informants' households (in particular) and those of the other villagers (in less detail) through this period. But this endeavour is liable to be confounded, for deciding how best to define what households are, leave aside how to map their changing fortunes, is extremely complicated. At any one time, some fathers and sons engage in jointly-organised agricultural work, but others do not. Similarly, mothers and daughters-in-law may organise their work in diverse ways for different tasks, all, some or none sharing a *chūlhā*, and with complex rotas for any co-owned livestock, for instance. If the father and mother are in the same household, it is not clear that the sons and daughters-in-law necessarily are too: sometimes a household demarcated by men's work and property ownership coincides with one bounded by the women's work—but often it does not.

Focusing on men's activities directs attention squarely to land-holding and 'class', agricultural and off-farm incomes, labour migration and the wider economy. Focusing on consumption and caring-work foregrounds the collaborations and conflicts over cooking, animal husbandry and childcare that feature prominently in women's day-to-day lives. So what should the primary rationale be for drawing boundaries around 'households'?

However households are delineated, analysing how they change adds a further layer of complexity. Men may stop working together. Daughters-in-law may separate their *chūlhās* from their mothers-in-law. Women are married out or married in, children are born, and people die. And although brothers usually begin their adult lives in the same class position, their fortunes can diverge radically and they may reach middle-age in very diverse situations. Differing educational levels might have permitted contrasting employment trajectories. Brothers have different numbers of sons and daughters to educate and settle in marriage and/or employment. There may have been deaths and illnesses that caused sudden and sometimes disastrous ruptures to normal budgeting, with distress-sales of land or livestock.¹⁷

Whilst this is all very intriguing, it creates headaches not just for grasping how the village class-profiles (for instance) have changed but also relating these processes to wider shifts in Indian society. Additionally, with the passage of time, my own interests have altered somewhat, in response to 'real world' trends in India and evolving academic concerns. Grappling with all this, though, presents a dilemma. Sustaining comparability of data over time nudges research towards rigidity and collecting the same kinds of information during each revisit. Yet responding to events and to new academic approaches implies introducing new topics—on which there cannot be systematic information covering the whole time period. True, the earlier fieldnotes include serendipitous conversations and details even on topics that did not seem very important at the time (though a great deal slipped through the net and is long forgotten). Thus, *some* insights can often be gleaned from earlier fieldwork—but the information is rarely sufficiently robust to be satisfying.

¹⁷ Krishna (2010), for instance, traces household trajectories (albeit through retrospective data) and indicates how household fortunes wax and wane over time, with illness a crucial factor. Snap-shot studies of poverty cannot capture the fluctuations *at the household level* that long-term studies can reveal.

The 1982 fieldwork inevitably highlighted some topics and side-lined others. It did not, for instance, explore ritual and religious practices. So am I right to believe that some rituals (such as those connected with *karva chauth*), were being practised by more women and in a more elaborate and commercialised fashion in the 2000s? Or was I simply not paying attention in 1982? Conversely, some topics addressed in 1982 were not explored in detail in subsequent fieldwork. Women's work was central in the nascent gender and development literatures at the time. The 1982 research included my collecting time-use data in the different seasons from the key informant women, to highlight the long hours, multi-tasking and evident necessity of their work—for women themselves, leave aside men, often devalued their contributions to household wellbeing. Women found this boring, despite my efforts at levity and cajoling them to include not only dung-work associated with livestock but also shit-work connected with babies. Resistance set in—and I hesitated to include such detailed questions again. Similarly, comparable information from the key informant men was not replicated in detail in later fieldwork and the village census material provides only sporadic information for the entire villages. Yet men—especially those from land-poor and landless households—enter and exit various employment roles throughout the seasons, or even play several roles simultaneously. Fluidity, dynamism and insecurity were central to many men's livelihood strategies in the 1980s, but were they more acute in the early 2000s?

In addition, the census and maternity history data cover all the households and ever-married women, but the qualitative information comes primarily from the key informants. Basically, the research has been a panel or cohort study, with other data supplying crucial background detail. The key informants' changing pre-occupations have been explored in some detail since 1982, and in the early 2000s the research concentrated on their concerns then: organising their children's marriages, their own declining capacities, paying for health-care and ensuring their own wellbeing in old-age, daughter-in-law troubles and the like. This later research, however, could not systematically incorporate (for instance) younger couples pre-occupied with childbearing to compare with the original key informants. Certainly, the views of the key informants' children were sought on various matters—including childbearing, family-planning, livelihood options, schooling and health-care. But this was more ad hoc than the rounds of interviews conducted over the years with the older generation.

Becoming too familiar with a research site is another potential pitfall. Many things that caught my attention, and sometimes took me aback, in the early 1980s have acquired such familiarity that I scarcely notice them now—the body language of *ghunghat* [veiling], for instance. And a flipside of commitment to one research site is not being intensively exposed to other locations and not having to confront new surprise factors. It is, perhaps, all too easy to fall prey to the delusion that rural India is all like rural Bijnor.¹⁸

On not being a fly on the wall

Social science research generally entails a direct social engagement between researcher and research subjects. For the researcher, ethnographic research involves navigating a tension between neutral and systematic researcher and involved and concerned human-being. Ethnographers cannot be flies on the wall. Being just a detached 'objective' observer is simply not possible (and, arguably, not even desirable). The researcher inevitably impacts on villagers' lives, sometimes but not always in obvious ways—and it is extremely difficult to ascertain the effects on the nature and quality of the data and on the research process overall.

¹⁸ Other projects have taken me to villages elsewhere in India (Assam, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Odisha, Rajasthan) and to Nepal, but none has entailed long-term residence in the area.

Endemic and sometimes overt tensions in village life reflect villagers' diverse social and economic locations. Yet the childbearing project in 1982-3 necessitated straddling fissures within the villages to obtain information from Muslims, caste Hindus and Dalits in differing class positions. This potentially raised anxieties about our loyalties and required our watchfulness and tact, simultaneously nurturing communication with the less powerful to hear their experiences and critiques, while avoiding antagonising the more powerful so that their enactments of dominance could also be revealed.

For gender politics, the focus on childbearing perhaps seemed 'apolitical' (though, of course, it is not) and this may have permitted some aloofness from other domains of village politics. In any case, potential difficulties were (I think) largely averted by adapting to local gender norms. The female research assistants and I talked to village women; as a foreigner, I could talk to men, including older men, although I rarely did so. Roger Jeffery and Andrew Lyon talked to men and were circumspect in dealing with women, scarcely engaging in eye-contact leave aside conversation. With this arrangement husbands and wives did not seem to be suspicious about our conversations with the other spouse.

Interactions involving people from different castes or religious communities—Kunwar Satya Vira's employees, dispensary patients, people piling into the jeep for lifts into Bijnor town—generally remained jocular on the surface. People often commented that Bijnor was not famed for communal tensions and had not experienced trouble at Partition. Nevertheless, caste and communal tensions were not far from the surface and negotiating villagers' caste and communal sensibilities has required delicate handling, more or less overtly, throughout the various research visits.

The Hindu (Brahmin) research assistants were acceptable to everyone in Dharmnagri and would take tea from Dalits. They were also acceptable to the Muslims in Jhakri. Yet the Muslim assistants were never warmly greeted in Dharmnagri and the Dharmnagri fieldnotes often record anti-Muslim sentiments voiced in their absence. Consequently, I generally needed to juggle my research schedules in the two villages according to which assistant was free to accompany me. Particularly in the early stages, most caste Hindus did not appreciate our mixing with Dalits and Muslims (and certainly not sitting among them and accepting refreshments). For many Dalits, Muslims were beyond the pale, whilst Muslims often alleged that caste Hindus and Dalits were complicit with the 'Hindu' Raj.

A small illustration of these prejudices arose in 1982, when we were infested with bedbugs [*katmal*]: the villagers seemingly could not believe that we had imported them ourselves. Rather, our profligate mixing with other people was to blame: the men who sat on our *morahs* on the veranda of an evening must have brought them on their clothing. Who precisely was accused depended on the speaker, though: caste Hindus blamed Dalits and Muslims, Dalits blamed Muslims, and Muslims blamed Dalits.¹⁹ Far more seriously, during 1990-1, several political events on the Indian stage as well as internationally threatened to lay waste to the research. In the second half of 1990, the proposal to implement the Mandal Commission report raised inter-caste tensions within Dharmnagri. Travel to and from Bijnor town was often disrupted by hockey-stick wielding male students. During developments in the Ayodhya campaign, kar sevaks tried to make their way to Ayodhya over the Madhya Ganga barrage and through Bijnor town. A procession turned violent and ended in some deaths and arson targeting Muslim-owned businesses. There was a curfew in Bijnor town for

¹⁹ This saga has another strand: the bedbug poison applied to the *chārpāīs* and *morahs* resulted in a cascade of dead insects onto the floor. Our Dhimar cook swept them into a heap which he surrounded with paraffin. After igniting the paraffin, he pranced around intoning 'Om, *shāntī*' in mockery of the village temple *pandit*.

over a week (Jeffery & Jeffery 1994b; Basu 1995). In Dharmnagri, some young men from the nearby Bengali refugee village harvested bamboo staves from Kunwar Satya Vira's boundary hedge, sharpened the points and reputedly applied poison—apparently with the intent of attacking Jhakri.²⁰ For several weeks, the research stalled. The research assistants were extremely anxious and conversations over lunch each day highlighted tensions among them that had been masked until then. During the first Gulf War in spring 1991 many Muslims in rural Bijnor mistrusted the 'Hindu' Indian government and foreigners alike (Jeffery & Jeffery 1997: xi-xiii, 1-37). Similarly, communal tensions erupted again with the juxtaposition of the invasion of Afghanistan and the Gujarat carnage during 2000-2.

Over the years, of course, we endeavoured to compensate for the data-extractive mode that fieldwork entails. We generally managed to avoid becoming embroiled in caste and communal conflicts. But we were willingly drawn into many of the villagers' other concerns—although, in truth, the Bijnor research has contributed rather little to the villagers' wellbeing and the exchange always remains extremely unequal. Villagers often wanted us to sponsor their quests for school admissions and employment, little realising that we had scant influence in the places that mattered and could not be relied upon to deliver. Other requests were more readily fulfilled, though. The maternity histories and census materials could provide details of births, marriages and deaths to people who had no written records: in 1990, Rajballa and Rohtash's son born in hospital in 1982 simply wanted to know how old he was, and when Rohtash's youngest brother Punni was arranging his son's marriage in 2004, he requested details of his son's date and hour of birth so that the son's horoscope could be compared with that of the prospective bride. The jeep was available for bridegrooms and their male relatives from Dharmnagri and Jhakri who wished to arrive in the bride's village in style and needed to transport the (often sobbing) brides to their new homes: perhaps the most striking instance was the hilarious occasion of Gulshan's within-village marriage in Jhakri in 1982 (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996a: 216). And the jeep could also take people to hospital in medical emergencies and for routine consultations that frightened them (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996a: 66), transport funeral parties, go on a mission to protect an out-married daughter in distress in her affinal village (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996a: 192-196), or be used to fetch medicines for the dispensary from Meerut during the curfew in Bijnor town. Sometimes, as in Rajballa's case, the intervention was not initiated by the villagers. Rather than watching—fly-on-the-wall style—the almost certainly fatal consequences of Rajballa's mismanaged labour, I prevented a second oxytocin injection being administered, spent a couple of hours cajoling and exhorting her reluctant family members to take her to hospital, and subsequently tried to ensure that her hospital stay was as comfortable as possible. Detachment was not an ethically-appropriate option.

Yet in other instances—not immediately life-threatening ones—I adopted a pose of impassive non-intervention. Just what should a researcher do when instances of marital violence come to light, when little girls are walloped and told that their mischief will not be tolerated in their affinal homes, when a sickly girl's mother is consoled with 'don't worry, she will recover and extract a dowry from you', or when the *dāī* performs an internal examination without washing her hands? Keeping my own counsel was not always possible, however, for women also quizzed me about life in UK, dowry and son preferences, care of the elderly and so forth, which probably prompted them to reflect anew on their own lives. Indeed, one time, several women needed my research assistant to explain why she was not yet married: her spirited

²⁰ Kunwar Satya Vira's brother had been Governor of Bengal at the time of the Pakistan civil war in 1970-1 that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. He arranged for some Hindu refugees from East Pakistan to be relocated in several newly-established villages around the Dharmnagri area.

riposte that she had no intention of committing herself into slavery [*ghulāmī*] sparked off a lively discussion of married life amongst the initially rather startled gathering (myself included) and resulted in one woman's conclusion that 'marriage is a calamity' [*shādī hai barbādī*] (Jeffery & Jeffery 1996a: 134-5).

It is hard to evaluate or control the impact of one's interventions—whether deliberately undertaken after consideration, or more spontaneous. There is surely also a swathe of unintended interventions of which I am unaware, and assessing their impact on the villagers is well-nigh impossible. Moreover, my own rather sporadic stays in Dharmnagri and Jhakri have occurred alongside numerous forces emanating from beyond the villages that have resulted in more or less substantial transformations in village life.

The 1982-3 Bijnor research involved huge investments of emotional and practical energy on an often troubling experience. Looking back, those first few months were crucial in later decisions not to risk similar experiences elsewhere but to continue returning to a place that became a second home. Rather by default, then, what was planned as a once-off fieldtrip gradually morphed into 'restudies' that have encompassed much of my academic career. I had little realised that substantial chunks of my waking-time would still revolve around thinking and writing about the area thirty years later.

Ethnographic restudies entail their own complexities, dilemmas and concerns, as well as rewards. Building relationships with a wide range of villagers involved time, delicacy, rebuffs, many frustrations and repeated repair work. Gradually, villagers began reporting our view that everyone was an *insān* [human-being] to their guests in apparently favourable tones—but in 1982 our insistence on this point caused widespread puzzlement and even consternation. With hindsight, it is easy (and sometimes disappointing) to appreciate the lack of foresight about what information would become important later and the risks of taking for granted things that had initially surprised me. Sometimes, too, it feels like treading a very narrow line between the richness of long-term data (despite the limitations) and being overwhelmed by information-overload. But this is not really a cry of desperation. Indeed, I more than appreciate the blessings of having such detailed material—but keeping track of the key informants over time, leave aside the wider village populations, does tax the grey matter.

Nevertheless, though, the long-term data collection certainly has enhanced my general understanding of how macro-level trends impact on quotidian aspects of rural life at the micro-level, from gender politics to communal politics, from demography and health-care to education and livelihoods. Undoubtedly, I have gained insights that would have been impossible without repeatedly visiting the area. Albeit through conversation and observation rather than direct personal experience, I now have (a limited and mediated) feel for villagers' *dukh-sukh*, their hopes and ambitions, their troubles and worries about illnesses and livelihoods, and their strivings in an often hostile economic and political climate. As a woman in Jhakri once commented to me, my heart has been in two places for many years. Rural Bijnor is now under my skin. And I have been immensely privileged to have had the opportunity for the personal enrichment that has also been a by-product of the Bijnor revisits.

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